

[Book Review] The trials of psychedelic therapy: LSD psychotherapy in America, by Matthew Oram, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2018

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Book Review – *The Trials of Psychadelic Therapy: LSD Psychotherapy in America*, by Matthew Oram, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2018

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In this comprehensive and thorough analysis, Matthew Oram (no relation) seeks to “disentangle LSD’s medical from its non-medical history” (p. 13). He is largely successful in achieving this goal, and does so via a compelling and detailed analysis of what may be described as one of the more unusual areas of American medical research. Oram skilfully weaves an engaging and thought provoking narrative which explores the origins, development, challenges, and eventual demise of widespread research into psychedelic therapy.

Central to Oram’s discussion are the complex challenges faced by researchers in psychedelic therapy. For example, the unique features of psychedelic drugs, such as their obvious and overt impact on the subjective psychological experiences of research participants meant that researchers continuously struggled to design a research study for LSD and other psychedelics which would meet the expected standard for double masked, randomised control trials (RCT) (see pp. 62-64 and 98-102). This challenge was exacerbated by the need for participants to be “guided” through their psychedelic treatment by researchers, the expectations and experiences of whom could both affect participant outcomes, and influence reporting of research results – potentially obscuring the extent to which results could be deemed to be objectively reliable. Equally, media reporting throughout the history of psychedelic research has consistently exaggerated both the positive and negative possibilities of the use of psychedelics in psychotherapy, stoking public fears about the risks of drug abuse (p. 220),

and setting unreasonable expectations of the value and impact of psychedelics for future research (p. 202).

In exploring these issues, Oram explores and illuminates a number of issues which will be of interest to researchers and educators working in a range of disciplines. In effect, the text as a whole provides a singular case study, albeit one which is comprised of numerous subsidiary cases, which individually and collectively raise questions of relevance to philosophers and historians of medicine and science, who will find Oram's discussion of the nature of medical treatment, mental health, and medical research particularly interesting. Correlatively, bioethicists exploring the history and nature of ethics in pharmaceutical research, will find much to consider, while philosophers of mind, neurologists, and psychologists, are each likely to find the discussion about the "mind-altering" properties of psychedelic therapy to be a source of complex discussion and disagreement. I am currently considering how I can best incorporate the book into my undergraduate neuroethics teaching for instance.

It is important to note at this point however, that despite its value to a range of scholars across disciplinary boundaries, the book remains a historical work. In itself, this should not be considered a weakness, but as a bioethicist I was frequently surprised with how rapidly the narrative moved past instances of research practice, which at least as described in the text, appeared to constitute issues of serious ethical concern, or of extremely negative consequences for research participants. For example, early in the book, he describes a case where 18 schizophrenic inpatients were selected for experimental treatment with LSD. Whether they consented to this participation is not mentioned, nor is their capacity to do so considered (p. 26). In part, the brevity of the consideration of these and other issues is a function of disciplinary norms – Oram is a historian, and this is not a bioethics textbook.

However, there are times in the text when further consideration of the ethical implications, or indeed alternative perspectives on LSD research, would be valuable. I do not mean to suggest that Oram does not acknowledge the dangers or criticisms of psychedelic therapy research, he does. However, when he does so, the discussion is often framed in terms of isolated cases, deviating from the dominant norm of good practice research conducted by ethical researchers, rather than taking these cases as indicators of possible sources of legitimate concern for the psychedelic project as a whole. I do not mean to suggest that psychedelic research was characterised by bad practice, but rather to note that there are numerous examples in the book, where the ethical significance of events, risks taken, and harms inflicted, are not discussed in depth. When compared to the way in which criticisms of the psychedelic project are subjected to intense scrutiny, this has the effect of undermining the authority of the book, by giving the impression, inadvertent I'm sure, that the author is very much on the side of the psychedelic researcher, come what may.

Of course, in itself this is not a problem, if presented deliberately as such a defence of psychedelic research. However, the book is presented as a historical account, and I cannot help feeling that the arguments in the book would benefit from a more detailed, and perhaps even-handed, examination and critique of those instances in psychedelic research where the fears of the project's antagonists were apparently realised.

It may of course be objected that this objection is unfair, a criticism from bioethics of a piece of historical scholarship. I don't mean to undermine the value of the book, which is considerable, but merely to note that by (inadvertently) minimising the risks, harms, and ethical concerns of psychedelic therapy research, the book misses an opportunity to explore a complex, and important set of questions which would have enhanced its

importance to a range of scholars still further. Nevertheless, I look forward to incorporating the book into my teaching.

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